



MAKING TEACHING OF CLOTHING MORE "REALISTIC"

Using the terms "realistic" and "unrealistic" is somewhat perilous today because these have become "fighting words." In political battles, one need only say his opponent's ideas are "unrealistic" to discredit him. But since we have come together to consider education in the light of reason instead of the heat of emotion, I assume that we can discuss "realism" safely and objectively.

What do we mean by "realistic" education? Is it not education keyed closely to our ways of living and to the eternal verities? No matter what the subject taught, teaching must be thus rooted in reality or it will fall short of fulfilling its fundamental function of helping students grow in their ability to cope with life.

Because of our focus upon family living, we home economists have been far more concerned than many other educators with the "reality" of our teaching. Certainly such concern has been manifested among teachers of clothing: in regional conferences, in the staff committees of many schools, and at the seminar on clothing consumption, distribution and production held at the University of Syracuse, ways of keying teaching more closely to life have been explored. Out of these discussions have come a broadened concept of the role that clothing education could play in the lives of students today and a more questioning attitude toward some teaching practices now followed in many schools.

In bringing before you some of the questions raised in these discussions, the purpose is not to criticize; instead, it is to indicate difficulties which trouble leaders in clothing education, with the hope of enlisting the help of many of you in finding ways of solving them.

One of the questions raised again and again in various forms is this: How "realistic" are some clothing teachers about what families can and do spend on their wardrobes? Is there a tendency, as some critics claim, to key teaching to expenditure levels beyond the reach of the great majority of families?

A tacit assumption concerning students' ability to spend for dress is unavoidable in many aspects of teaching. In teaching clothing selection, for example, a teacher commonly uses garments to illustrate her meaning. By so doing she implies (perhaps unconsciously) that similar garments could be bought by her students. But can they? Is her assumption based upon facts or is it only a surmise? A teacher, for example, showed her class winter coats costing around \$75. Did she know the approximate amount spent yearly on clothing by girls who typically spend

1/ Paper presented by Day Monroe at the annual meeting of the American Home Economics Association, June, 1953.

\$75 for such a coat? What income would a father need in order to give his daughter this yearly total as her allowance for dress? Would this income place him in the upper-income fifth of the country's families --that is, would he be relatively wealthy? Or would he be at about the middle of the income scale?

It is easy to fall into the error of assuming that clothing outlays of most families are greater than they actually are. We see displays of expensive garments in stores and we know that they are bought by someone. We read that total clothing expenditures in this country are now around the amazing total of \$21 billion! What we are less likely to read is that approximately half, or even more, of this dollar volume of clothing goes to as few as one-fourth of the families -- those with the highest incomes. The remaining three-fourths buy only half, or a little less, of the total. The well-to-do one-fifth of the families with their generous wardrobes absorb most of the expensive clothing that moves through our markets. Our students, however, are likely to come from the four-fifths of the families that buy garments of moderate price.

Clothing expenditures of middle-income families provide a useful bench-mark for teachers. In 1952 (the latest year for which such data are available), median family income in this country was about \$3,600; that is, half of the families had money incomes above and half, incomes below this sum. Clothing expenditures of typical middle-income families are around \$396 -- about 11 percent of income. Patterns of using family clothing funds differ with family composition. In a middle-income family of three with a daughter entering high school, the wife might spend \$155; the husband, \$115 and the daughter, \$126. If the daughter were entering college, her expenditures would be greater and her mother's and father's expenditures less than these amounts.

An unusually detailed picture of the level of clothing consumption of middle-income families is provided by the study made by the Bureau of Human Nutrition and Home Economics in St. Paul and Minneapolis (Ref. 1). We shall use the wife's expenditures to illustrate this level since the girls in the families surveyed were, for the most part, below high school age. A typical or "average" wife spent \$155 yearly for clothing and accessories. About one-sixth of this total, or \$25, went for all dresses except housedresses. This enabled the woman to buy two dresses a year -- one of rayon, silk or wool, for autumn; one of cotton, silk or rayon for spring. (Acetate was classed as rayon when this study was made.) The average price paid for a rayon dress was \$14.50 and the dress was worn for three years, probably moving from "best" to "second best" at the end of the first year and thence to use for everyday. About \$50 was paid for a heavy winter coat which was worn for 4 or 5 years before another was bought. Does our teaching concerning fashion and buying fit into this picture?

Teaching that assumes outlays for dress appreciably greater than those of the majority of one's students may do no worse than fall short of giving them the help they need in using their clothing resources; but there is likelihood of more regrettable consequences. Inability to dress as well as the assumed level may increase the feeling of social inadequacy of a shy girl. A girl who knows little about her family's finances -- and such girls are in the majority -- may interpret her relatively small clothing allowance as indicative of lack of parental generosity and press to have it increased. Her teacher thus contributes to family tensions although an avowed purpose of home economics is to lessen them.

Another question troubling many teachers is: Has teaching of clothing changed to keep step with changes in women's practices of home sewing and their attitudes toward it? Or has there been a so-called "educational lag"? Garment construction is given a prominent place in most clothing curricula on the assumption that girls and women devote considerable time to home sewing. Do current trends support this assumption?

The whole pattern of women's and girls' use of time has been changing since the turn of the century, reflecting changes in women's roles in their homes and communities and in their interests. An increasing number of women and girls are earning outside their homes. No need to point out that these women have less time for sewing and other household tasks than their non-earning sisters; that they are turning some of these tasks over to business and seeking shortcuts for those they continue to perform.

This tendency is not limited to earning homemakers, however. Witness the growth of businesses that serve all homes, as of industries that lighten the work of food preparation, of commercial laundries, of manufacturers of labor-saving equipment, and of the great garment-making industry.

Attitudes toward some household tasks seem to be changing. For example, the phenomenal increase in sales of cake mixes indicates that many women want to get out of the kitchen. Being "the best cakemaker in Argo County" lends less prestige than a few decades ago. Women have other interests. Young Mrs. Doe does not feel, as did her mother, that she must make all the little garments in her baby's layette by hand. She bought a layette and is spending her time studying child psychology. The shortened workweek for man has helped change women's preferences for time uses. Wives want more time to spend with their husbands on such joint projects as papering, painting, and gardening; more time for enjoying television with the family.

Time was when we had little information concerning the extent of home sewing. Now, however, we have four studies, all made since the war, which are in substantial agreement as to these facts (Ref. 2).

Only about one-half of the women and girls, 18 or older, in this country do so-called "creative" sewing (as distinguished from mending).

Of those who sew, only about one-half -- one-fourth of all women and girls -- make appreciable contributions to their own wardrobes. The others make few garments -- perhaps aprons, an occasional sweater, or a dress or blouse.

Dresses of cotton or rayon -- not wool -- were the garments most frequently made by women for themselves or for their daughters; blouses, separate skirts, and play clothes ranked next. There was relatively little making of coats and suits. Apparently, most women are willing to leave the most difficult and time-consuming of the sewing tasks to industry.

On the basis of the number of women sewing and the kinds and quantities of garments they made, as shown by these studies, we can be reasonably certain that less than one-tenth of the clothing the people of this country consume in a year is made at home. If we buy nine-tenths of the clothing we consume, our purchases are enormous -- around \$19 billion during 1953 at current rates of spending. Do not these data indicate the need for a reexamination of the place of buying in clothing curricula? "But" someone will say, "our curriculum already is overcrowded." Perhaps these data also indicate how some of the overcrowding might be lessened!

The emphasis given garment construction and the consequent exclusion of many other aspects of clothing education is justified in some institutions by the claim that women will some day turn back to sewing. Is there not greater likelihood of an acceleration of the trend away from cooking and sewing? History shows few instances where society has turned the clock back. Would we reverse the trend if we could? Are we sure that the gains from markedly increasing home sewing would exceed the losses, such as loss of time for child care, civic enterprises and family recreation? Instead of turning our eyes to the past should we not recognize women's preferences for ways of spending time today and teach them shortcuts for home sewing?

This question concerning shortcuts raises another: Is there need to re-examine the standards we set for students' achievement in making clothing? How good should a finished product be?

At the Syracuse seminar when shortcuts were discussed some teachers said they never used them. that to do so would mean "letting down standards." Many teachers of foods are similarly perplexed: "Will not our standards be sacrificed if we teach shortcuts in cooking, as in cake-making?" they ask.

Do some of our difficulties concerning standards stem from "ivory tower" attitudes? In college we place a premium -- an A grade -- upon product perfection. In the world outside, to call a woman a "perfectionist" in housekeeping is to imply that she uses poor judgment as to her use of time and energy. Students find the difference between these two sets of attitudes frustrating. A young married woman said her first months of homemaking were made difficult by the conflict between her standards from her home economics classes and her time. Her work was never done; her husband complained because she did not have time to do things with him; family harmony suffered. Finally, to use her expression, she "let her standards go" and lived happily ever after! Other students have reported similar situations.

What do such reports indicate? Part, but by no means all of the difficulty, may lie in the standards themselves. How should we determine what our standards of technical achievement should be? Reexamination of our purpose in teaching may help us clarify our ideas. What is our ultimate purpose in teaching girls to sew and to cook? Is it to produce a product as nearly perfect as possible? Or, are we interested in the product primarily because of its contribution to the enrichment of life? I suspect that a teacher who viewed a dress as a means to happier living might have achievement standards somewhat different from those of a teacher who viewed technical ability in making the dress as an end in itself. But no matter what criteria we set for the goodness of products made in classes, we should help students realize that in the world outside, these standards may come into conflict with human values; that when this happens, the human values must win.

Back of the concern of some teachers for "maintaining standards" is the matter of justification of credit for a course. A high school teacher remarked that her principal would not consider her course worthy of credit if the students did not turn out dresses meeting high criteria of workmanship. Do some teachers share this principal's attitude? Or, do all agree that other bases should determine the right of a clothing course to be included in the school's curriculum?

Most schools offer more work on clothing consumption than a few decades ago. There has been a marked increase in the help given girls in their selection of clothing. But this is only a small part of the education a girl needs if she is to become a wise consumer. As Hazel Kyrk pointed out, a primary purpose of such education should be to increase a consumer's understanding of her own standards of clothing consumption so that she may develop independence instead of "following the crowd." Such teaching is based upon sociology (since consumption is rooted in social customs) and psychology. How much of our teaching has such a basis?

Wise clothing consumption is a means to an end; that is, it is a means for helping a consumer develop her best capacities and thus make her life happier and more fruitful. By helping a girl improve her

clothing consumption, we can help her develop her esthetic interests and express them in daily living; can help her build the inner poise that she needs for meeting life. By increasing her understanding of clothing consumption of others, we can help her understand people and grow in ability to get along with them -- that is, make good social adjustments.

But unless we are wise and careful, we may encourage students to overemphasize dress. Most girls of high school and college age are keenly interested in clothes since they want to look their best. (Psychologists have written much about the importance of clothing as a means of enhancing attractiveness during the so-called "mating period.") It is part of a teacher's job to help her students satisfy this interest by teaching them to use their clothing resources well. But she has not completed her job unless she also helps them to distinguish between "enough" and "too much" preoccupation with their wardrobes.

It is all too easy for girls to make "being well dressed" an end in itself, rather than a means of achieving human values. They tend to accept an erroneous idea, unfortunately all too widespread, that clothes, alone, endow one with personality. Some go even farther: they think that a girl cannot have personality unless her clothing is so attractive as to set her apart from most of her associates. How can our teaching lessen this confusion between "having" and "being" -- between material things and true values in life?

This confused thinking not only hinders a girl from realizing her own best potentialities; it also, leads her to hurt others. Because she judges people by their dress, she helps to make financial inability to keep up with the latest fads and fashions a barrier to social participation. As Hartmann said, in a talk to the Eastern clothing conference (Ref. 3), "....we find clothing still insolently employed as a badge of snobbish exclusion and discrimination, much to the resentment and deep hurt of broad masses of our citizenry." Are teachers of clothing meeting their responsibilities for preventing use of clothing for expressing "superiority"?

More than half a century ago, Veblen (Ref. 4) pointed to the prevalence of conspicuous and competitive consumption -- especially of clothing -- in our society. This still prevails. If the Joneses want to impress folk with their wealth, they find clothing an excellent tool. Note that Mrs. Jones can practice conspicuous consumption and still dress in excellent taste: her dress will be conspicuous by its expensiveness. In order to be certain that her friends are aware of her lavish expenditure, she need only let them know, casually of course, that her new suit is one of Adrian's latest models. If Mrs. Smith is trying to keep up with Mrs. Jones -- that is, if she is practicing competitive consumption -- she will try to have clothing equally expensive. Thus, clothing practices

of both Mrs. Jones and Mrs. Smith foster envy and jealousy and hinder good relationships with others. Does our teaching lead students to avoid such misuses of clothing?

Earlier we questioned whether some clothing curricula give consumer-buying an emphasis commensurate with the importance of purchased garments in the wardrobes of this country's families. Now let us consider some other aspects of our teaching of clothing buying.

Helping girls become good buyers is one of the responsibilities of clothing education, according to most clothing teachers. That is, we are responsible for increasing students' ability to obtain good returns (in satisfactions) for their clothing expenditures, regardless of how much or how little they can spend. But, in some instances, do teaching practices hinder fulfillment of this responsibility? Consider the following incident: A high-school teacher, looking at an exhibit of moderate-price dresses, such as middle-income girls might buy, remarked: "I never use dresses of that price as illustrative material; I couldn't teach good buying if I did." Some of the dresses, she granted, were surprisingly well made for their price; but they fell below the standard of quality she taught her students to seek when purchasing. Dresses meeting her standard are relatively expensive, seldom bought by any girls save the well-to-do; hence, only such girls could do buying of the sort that she taught was "good." How helpful would her teaching be for girls of moderate income -- probably a large proportion of her high-school class.

To help middle-income girls and women obtain good returns for their clothing money a teacher not only should know the prices they customarily pay but also should become familiar with the types of stores they patronize and the merchandise these stores offer. Marketing surveys have shown that a large proportion of the clothing bought by middle-income women is purchased at the so-called "value" stores. (A "value" store, according to market terminology is one which concentrates upon giving its customers value in merchandise for their money as distinguished from a store which gives less merchandise and more services). Are there many high-school teachers of clothing who would say, as did one, that she had never been inside the "value" stores in the city where she taught?

In buying a garment, a woman usually compares several and selects the one which, in her judgment, will prove most satisfactory when used. By what methods shall we teach girls to make sound judgments of market offerings? Some teachers recommend that it be done through teaching garment construction. They say, for example, that a girl learns to judge goodness of buttonholes of a suit by making them. No one would deny that we learn by doing. But is there time in life to learn to make all of the countless things we buy? How practical would we consider our colleagues in housing if they suggested teaching a girl the

skills of housebuilding as a means of increasing her ability to make a good selection when she and her husband go house hunting.

Marketing studies have repeatedly shown examples of identical articles offered at appreciably different prices within the same shopping district. Research by home economists has proved conclusively that price is not a reliable guide to quality; that a relatively expensive article may be inferior in quality to one of lower price. Nevertheless, students continue to make such remarks as: "Of course, it's better; it costs more." Such students obviously lack understanding of the structure of retail prices. They are not aware that a difference in the price tags on two dresses may have no relation to their inherent qualities; that it may reflect differences in the efficiency of the manufacturers or retailers selling them, differences in retail services (as credit and delivery) offered along with the dress, or differences of many other sorts. Have clothing teachers given sufficient attention to increasing students' understanding of price? Or, has there been a tendency to view the job of teaching clothing buying narrowly -- to limit it, for the most part, to garment selection?

Pursuing this question of scope of the job of teaching buying we may well ask: Are we helping students develop sufficient understanding of retail clothing markets to enable them to meet their responsibilities as consumer-buyers?

Consumers' responsibilities as buyers are threefold: (1) they are responsible for developing the abilities needed for wise decisions concerning their purchases; (2) they share with retailers, wholesale distributors and producers responsibility for maintaining good markets that serve the interests of consumer-buyers on one side of the retail counter and of the venders of clothing, on the other side; (3) they are responsible, as citizens, for helping ensure that government policies and programs relating to markets are in the public interest -- not dictated by the interests of one group in our **economy**, for supporting regulations that promote "fair play."

To meet each of these three responsibilities, a consumer needs a broad understanding of markets. For example, she cannot make sound decisions concerning her purchases of clothing unless the market provides arrangements, as informative labeling, for giving her information she needs. But she cannot expect such arrangements unless she works for them. Our American Home Economics Association has followed a policy of cooperating with business, primarily through the National Consumer-Retailer Council to bring about market practices desirable to both sides of the retail counter. As equipment for such cooperation, a consumer needs an appreciation of the job done by producers and distributors in helping us become "the best dressed nation in the world," and a recognition of the problems they face in helping us resolve our buying difficulties. Consumption, marketing and production of clothing are so interrelated that many of our problems, as consumers, stem from

unsolved problems in the two other areas. As for the third responsibility, it is obvious that consumer-buyer-citizens cannot take an intelligent stand upon legislation affecting markets unless they understand the interests and problems of both buyers and sellers.

And now the last question, closely related to those which have gone before: Is clothing education meeting its responsibilities for contributing to students' general education?

All teachers, no matter what they teach, have an obligation to help their students grow in maturity, becoming effective in meeting their personal and social responsibilities and wise in the art of living. Clothing teachers have unique opportunities for giving such help. Through teaching clothing consumption, they can (as we have noted) increase their students' ability to discriminate among values and to clarify their philosophy of life; throughout all clothing courses, there are opportunities for helping students make good personal and social adjustments. But these and other opportunities for contributing to students' general education will not be available unless the scope of clothing education is broadened.

Implicit in the foregoing questions is a firm belief by teachers that clothing education of the future has potentialities far greater than those of the past when it was more narrowly limited to development of technical skills; a realization that these potentialities cannot be realized unless teaching of clothing is keyed more closely to our way of life than heretofore. To accomplish this, better roads to "reality" must be found in fashioning clothing curricula and courses, and in selecting teaching methods. This will not be easy; but viewing the beginning already made, can there be any doubt as to the success of the enterprise -- especially if the number of participating teachers increases.

References

- 1) Bureau of Human Nutrition and Home Economics, Family Clothing Purchases by Income, Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minn. 1948-49.
- 2) Four studies:
 - a) Bureau of Agricultural Economics, Women's Preferences Among Textile Products, U. S. Dept. of Agri., Misc. Pub. 641, Dec. 1947.
 - b) Bureau of Human Nutrition and Home Economics, Family Clothing -- Gift, Homemade, Handed Down, Minneapolis-St. Paul, 1948-49.
 - c) Simplicity Pattern Company, Inc., Facts You Should Know About Women Who Sew.
 - d) Everett R. Smith and Frances Foote, The Apparel and Accessories Market, New York; Macfadden Publications, Inc., 1950.
- 3) George W. Hartmann, "Clothing: Personal Problem and Social Issue," Journal of Home Economics, June 1949, Vol. 41, No. 6.
- 4) Thorstein Veblen, The Theory of the Leisure Class, New York: Vanguard Press. (Copyright, 1899).

...in the
... ..
... ..

... ..
... ..
... ..

... ..
... ..
... ..
... ..
... ..
... ..
... ..
... ..
... ..
... ..
... ..

... ..
... ..
... ..
... ..
... ..
... ..
... ..
... ..
... ..
... ..
... ..

References

1.
2.
3.
4.
5.
6.
7.
8.
9.
10.